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THE BELOVED

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FOURTH
PRESBY
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A LIGHT IN THE CITY

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Scripture: Genesis 1:1-5, Mark 1:4-11

"And a voice came from heaven, 'You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.'"
Mark 1:11 (NRSV)

It was a pretty good week for religion in the media. Jesus got us into both *Time Magazine* and the *New York Times*. In the *Times* it was not the kind of picture that ordinarily attracts me to the accompanying article. It appeared on the first page of last Sunday's Arts and Leisure section. It was nearly a full half-page. A young man dressed in a black tee shirt and vest, with silver and wooden crucifixes dangling from his neck and a dense tangle of curls cascading around his shoulders and down over his face: head tilted back, eyes closed, an expression of dull pain. "Michael McDermott," said the *Times*, "could at first glance be mistaken for one of the legions of young rockers who have made a mantra out of sex, drugs and the meaninglessness of life."

So why was I reading the article? Because the headline announced, "Rock Finds Religion Again," and no working preacher would resist that. Now I confess: I have never heard of Mr. McDermott. But it wasn't far into the article that I found myself appreciating him. His current popular album is called "Gethsemane," and in one of the numbers he sings lyrics like this:

> "I'm frightened by the way I feel, I'm losing faith in everything and everyone but you."

The article reported a renewed interest in spirituality and religious themes in today's rock music. In the interview Mr. McDermott, who is no longer traditionally religious, but once thought about becoming a priest, said:

> "Christ is a very powerful image to grow up with. Here's this guy nailed to a cross hanging on your wall. How can you not be affected by that?"

The *Time Magazine* article was a review of three new scholarly books on the life of Jesus which are causing quite a stir. One of them is written by John Dominic Crossan, a professor at DePaul University. Mr. Ostling of *Time* does not like what Professor Crossan says about Jesus.

One of the enduring realities of life is that Jesus continues to fascinate, intrigue, disturb, get under people's skin, regardless of what else is happening theologically or ecclesiastically. Asked who in the past they would most like to meet, an amazing number of people say "Jesus," whether or not they are traditional churchgoers. It has happened in every age; the person of Jesus has retained its compelling fascination.

And, every age thinks of him differently. That is the thesis of a fine book by Yale scholar, Jaroslav Pelikan, *Jesus Through the Centuries.* In the early Greek era, Jesus is portrayed as a mighty warrior battling the armies of Satan. After Constantine, Jesus was conceived as a King, ruling from his throne. In the Middle Ages, he was a perfectly obedient monastic, humble, chaste. Pelikan observes that if you could lift Jesus out of the art and literature there wouldn't be much left of Western civilization.

How do you think of him? Gentle teacher, compassionate healer, friend of children, calming a storm, vigorously debating his opponents, driving money changers from the temple, whip in hand, the crucified, bruised, bloody, strong and courageous? Most of us have been influenced by art more than we realize, I believe. There are, of course, no authentic pictures of him, not even a reliable physical description. So in our mind's eye, for most of us, there is a Jesus created by the popular art . . . Salmon, whose head of Christ looks out from the walls of thousands of churches and Sunday School rooms.

In the first church I served, Salmon's Christ was directly behind the organist, carefully watching her . . . while behind the pulpit was an illuminated Jesus, surrounded by a group of laughing children and leaping lambs. Part of the liturgy was when the usher, just before I appeared through the little doors, approached the chancel and reverently snapped on the light behind Jesus and the children, a kind of low-church version of a genuflection, I always thought. Salmon's Christ is not, obviously, an attempt to paint a picture that has any resemblance to Jesus of Nazareth, who after all was a peasant, a Jew, and who would have looked Arabic. Salmon painted him as a twentieth century Englishman, with soft brown hair, neatly trimmed wavy beard, dreamy eyes, and a lovely white robe.

Maybe for you it is another one of the popular pictures: Jesus walking with little children and the lambs - again, everybody is neat, clean, glowing with good health and clearly Anglo- Saxon; or Jesus praying in the garden.

There is nothing wrong, of course, with any of them. In fact, there's a lot right about any art that points to deep and compelling truth, particularly the truth in Jesus. Unless, of course, the picture or the mental conception, the assumptions begin to be the reality for us.

There has always been part of the Christian community, the scholarly part, that has said,

> "Let's try to discover the reality: try to learn as much about the Jesus who lived 2,000 years ago as we can. Maybe we can add clarity and understanding to religious faith. Maybe we'll learn something useful."

So in places like McCormick Theological Seminary and the University of Chicago Divinity School, highly skilled, devoted scholars submit what data we have about Jesus to the same rigorous, objective examination as any other historical figure we want to understand.

That activity itself offends some people; others think it is important.

When scholarship addresses the person of Jesus, the first observation is that there simply is not much hard data to go on. There is no record of what he did, for instance, between his birth and the age of twelve. And then there is a gap of another eighteen years until the story starts when he is thirty. Furthermore, nobody at the time bothered to write anything down. It was a full generation after he lived that a small account appeared, written by a man whose name was Mark. During the next forty or fifty years several other accounts of his ministry appeared — Matthew, Luke, John among them, each a little different, each unique, each with a particular readership in mind.

So for years and years scholars sit in libraries and visit museums and go on archeological digs, and today in front of computers, studying, laboriously reconstructing crumbling papyrus copies, comparing texts, researching, digging, analyzing . . . to try to learn who he was. Albert Schweitzer wrote a scholarly book which gave the project a title, *The Quest of the Historical Jesus.*

And today the quest is continued by John Dominic Crossan who teaches at DePaul. Crossan has written a major work, *The Historical Jesus,* and a smaller volume, *Jesus, A Revolutionary Biography,* both of which were criticized by *Time Magazine* last week.

We are still, in fact, asking a question that people were asking 2,000 years ago. "Who is this? Who is Jesus?" Somehow we seem to know that the answer to that question has something to do with who we are.

I should like us to join the quest, to ask both of those questions. Who is he? Who am I? And I plan to focus on incidents in the first small account, the Gospel According to Mark, between now and Easter.

The story begins, the way Mark presents it, when Jesus of Nazareth walks into the waters of the Jordan River and is baptized. It is a good day to think about that — the baptism of the Lord. After the nativity has captivated our attention, after the angels, shepherds and wisemen, after the trees are gone and our wonderful electric sheep unplugged and stored until next year, Mark's story is a reminder that there are serious matters to attend to and important decisions to make. Mark starts things out in an adult mode with a thirty-year-old changing his vocation and discovering the passionate purpose of his life. Mark is a reminder that Christianity is about repentance, turning around, changing; it is about deciding to be something and do something. It is about sacrifice and sometimes suffering and dying. And it is about resurrection and joy and confidence.

So one day he finds himself standing in a crowd of people who have come out of town into the wilderness — for the same reason I suppose people continue to get out of bed, get dressed up and travel to church on Sunday morning. These people have come to hear a man talk about God and God's kingdom, and one of the ones who responds — who decides on the spot to repent, to turn around, to seek and accept God's new life — is this Jesus of Nazareth. And for him that day, the way Mark tells the story, was the occasion when he got an answer to the question he was asking and, in a sense, all of us ask, "Who am I and what is my life about?"

Mark says he had a vision that day — it was as if the very heavens opened, as if the very spirit of God descended on him, and he heard a voice, the way Mark tells the story, the voice was for him only: and the voice said, "You are my Son, the Beloved: with you I am well pleased."

So the first thing Mark tells us about Jesus is that he is God's son, God's beloved — and — that for him to change his life, to discover the focus of his life, to begin to live out whatever being the son of God means, he needed first to hear that voice — to hear God say, "with you I am well pleased." And in addition to telling us interesting facts about a life lived 2,000 years ago, this story now is inviting us in, and if you are listening carefully you are already asking questions about your own life. Of course, there will be strenuous challenges ahead. Of course, there will be sacrifices and commitment and three years in the future there will come a day when he must summon the courage to die with integrity and strength — alone. But for now, he needs to hear who he is, God's son — that he is beloved: that God is pleased with him.

There is nothing any of us needs more urgently than that. We yearn, some of us all our lives, to know that we are beloved — that someone is well pleased with us.

Physicians know that human infants who are beloved by someone thrive. Infants who are not loved have difficulty thriving. Psychiatrists know that healthy emotional development depends on that word being said somehow by someone: "You are my son, my daughter, the beloved," that human beings thrive best when it is said by a mother and a father: that if one or the other or both are not present to say it, the child will suffer and will need someone to say it for whoever is missing.

Stuart Smalley, the Saturday Night Live character who spends most of his time trying to learn how to love himself in a variety of Twelve Step Programs and who begins each routine by gazing adoringly into a mirror and saying: "I'm good enough. I'm smart enough and, doggone it, people like me . . ." had a pre-Christmas crisis trying to decide whether or not to visit his dysfunctional family for the holidays. The thought of his addictive, controlling parents, so into denial, had sent him into one of his "shame spirals." He began to overeat which caused him to hate himself. He decided finally to go home, not only because he had already paid for a non-refundable ticket, but the fact was his parents were the only persons in the world he could count on to love him.

If no one ever says, "You are beloved, with you I am well pleased," human beings are inclined to spend their lives trying to find someone to say it, or something to do — some success big enough to earn the right to be loved: to be pleasing to someone. And police and parole officers know that when it doesn't happen at all, when no one ever tells you you are beloved, precious, valuable; when you are told the opposite, that you aren't worth anything, that you are ugly, stupid, bad, unlovable, pleasing to no one — you will begin to believe it, and to live out the dismal and often times tragically violent implications of life with no value, no purpose, no meaning.

American author, Toni Morrison won a Nobel Prize for literature. In her novel entitled, significantly, *Beloved,* an old woman is the spiritual guide, the heart and soul of an African American community in Cincinnati after the Civil War. Her name is Baby Suggs.

Listen to Toni Morrison write memorably about what it means to be beloved, to be pleasing to God. The scene is a clearing in the woods where Baby Suggs went on a hot Saturday afternoon followed by the men and women and children, free from slavery, but learning about the virulent demeaning racism which followed.

> "Baby Suggs bowed her head and prayed silently. The company watched her from the trees. They knew she was ready when she put her stick down. Then she shouted, 'Let the children come!' and they ran from the trees toward her.
>
> "'Let your mothers hear you laugh,' she told them, and the woods rang. The adults looked on and could not help smiling.
>
> "Then 'Let the grown men come,' she shouted. They stepped out one by one from among the ringing trees.
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> "'Let your wives and your children see you dance,' she told them, and groundlife shuddered under their feet.
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> "Finally she called the women to her: 'Cry,' she told them. 'For the living and the dead. Just cry.' And without covering their eyes the women let loose.
>
> "It started that way: laughing children, dancing men, crying women and then it got mixed up. Women stopped crying and danced; men sat down and cried; children danced, women laughed, children cried until, exhausted and riven, all and each lay about the clearing damp and gasping for breath. In the silence that followed, Baby Suggs, holy, offered up to them her great big heart.
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> "She did not tell them to clean up their lives or to go and sin no more. She did not tell them they were the blessed of the earth, its inheriting meek or its glorybound pure.
>
> "She told them that the only grace they could have was the grace they could imagine. That if they could not see it, they would not have it.
>
> "'Here,' she said, 'in this here place, we flesh; flesh that weeps, laughs; flesh that dances on bare feet in grass. Love it. Love it hard. Yonder they do not love your flesh. They despise it. They don't love your eyes; they'd just as soon pick em out. No more do they love the skin on your back. Yonder they flay it. And O my people they do not love your hands. Those they only use, tie, bind, chop off and leave empty. Love your hands! Love them. Raise them up and kiss them. Touch others with them, pat them together, stroke them on your face 'cause they don't love that either. You got to love it, you!'" [p. 87, 88]

The only grace you can have is the grace you can imagine.

> "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased."

Jesus needed to hear those words . . . and so do you and I.

Of course, there is more to Gospel than that; there is repentance and decision and conversion and commitment and sacrifice, but first, before anything else, there is grace; there is a loving God who says —

> "You are my daughter — you are my son — my beloved — with you I am well pleased."

It is what baptism means — an attempt in symbol and ritual to say a saving truth. "You are a child of God, sealed by the Spirit in baptism." And it is an occasion, as we baptize children, for each of us to remember the promise of our own baptism. Water was placed on us, as it was on Jesus' head. And the truth about us was said — as we believe it was said to him that day long ago. It is truth that can give you new life. You are God's son — God's daughter. It is truth that can save your soul — you are God's beloved. It is truth that can fill your spirit with joy and courage and confidence. There is, as the Gospel of Mark says in the first sentence . . . some very good news. With you, God is well pleased.

Amen.

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> God of grace, we thank you for your love revealed in Jesus — and for all the ways across the years you have loved us. Help us, in all we do, to live in your love, in Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.